

Chapter 01 – Introduction

Announcer: Charlie Soap has dedicated his entire career to strengthening many Cherokee communities in northeastern Oklahoma. Serving under three chiefs, he was community service group leader for the Cherokee Nation, overseeing a \$100 million budget dedicated to many projects including public transit services, roads, bridges, and infrastructure.

Following his career with the tribe, Mr. Soap worked with business education and political leaders to establish the Boys and Girls Club of Tahlequah and served as its founding director.

Under Mr. Soap's leadership, the club operated a comprehensive summer enrichment program and, working with Tahlequah Public Schools, developed the first after-school program in the school system.

The collaboration between the Boys and Girls Club and the Tahlequah Public Schools has served as a national model. For seven years, Mr. Soap was the Oklahoma area director of the Christian Children's Fund.

In his oral history interview Charlie talks about the Bell Water Project, which not only produced water but also produced long lasting relationships he reflects upon on the oral history website and podcast Voices of Oklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 – 10:50 Looking for Medicine

John Erling (JE): Before we get started here, Charlie, you wanted to offer a prayer. Why don't you do that now?

Charlie Soap (CS): (Charlie utters a Cherokee Prayer)

JE: That was in Cherokee, obviously.

CS: Right.

JE: Can you summarize what you said so we understand?

CS: I just ask the Heavenly Father to be with us for this interview. Thank the Lord for your being here to interview us and that this interview may be useful to people in other parts of the country that will help them. And also just help us just go through this interview. Give us the right words to say and that it may be something very effective to the public or to the people.

JE: Amen.

CS: Amen.

JE: Amen. Thank you, Charlie.

CS: You're welcome.

JE: In the room here is your friend Christina.

CS: Christina Kale.

JE: And she may guide us and keep us on the narrow path. So if we hear a little prompting.

CS: She's good at that too.

JE: Yes. So my name is John Erling, and today's date is November 16, 2022. Charlie, would you state your full name, please?

CS: My name is Charlie Lee Soap.

JE: What is your name in Cherokee?

CS: (Utters his name in Cherokee). It means "the last one walking".

JE: Last one walking.

CS: Yes, sir.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

CS: In Cherokee County, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, and we're on the banks of the beautiful Illinois River.

JE: I am thrilled to be here. This area is so beautiful. Your log house here, it's just gorgeous. It's wonderful. It's one of the neatest settings I've had when I've been recording.

CS: I've always wanted a log house all my life. Ever since I was in high school, I always had a dream and had a log house, and it came about in my elder years.

JE: Yeah. Well, it's very, very nice. What we will do here is take from the manuscript, *Water as Medicine, The Lifetimes and Wisdom of Charlie Soap*, a modern healer and helper of Cherokee communities. *How Charlie Soap Spread the Cherokee Value Of Collective Work For The Common Good*.

Now, this was written by Greg Shaw. Could you just give us a little bit about Greg, who he is?

CS: Yeah. Well, let me comment on a couple of things first, and that the title, *Water as Medicine*, it's just sort of something to go with at the moment for the book, but I don't think that's going to be the real title. And then also, the description of Charlie Soap, there's going to be minor changes in that. But Greg Shaw was a person that I met many years ago when he came to work for the Cherokee Nation as a reporter.

He took an interest in my work, working in the communities as a community organizer. He followed me to many, many communities, visiting Cherokee communities. I must say he's a very different type of person because he is brilliant, not knowing that he spoke five languages. I don't remember which ones he spoke, but I know for one he spoke Spanish and English, and then I think he spoke French.

I'm not sure about that, but he took an interest in the language, and he would ask me how to say certain things. And I was very amazed how quickly he caught on, how he could say the Cherokee words correctly. I asked him one time, I said, "How is it that you're able to catch on to the words?"

And he said, "I speak five languages. And he said, it's very easy for me." So it made it more comfortable for me to teach him the words that he wanted to say. I think one of the first words he learned was, "Are you ready?" he said, "How do you say that?" I said, (utters the words in Cherokee) And he would come into the office, and he would say, (utters the words in Cherokee).

When we got ready to go, and we would go, how do you say this? How do you say that?

And it was very valuable for him as we went into the Cherokee communities, because a lot of times the people who stand in the office, when you have a stranger come in, especially in the rural, full-blood communities, but when he would start talking Cherokee a little bit, and they would look at him surprisingly, but you could tell the people liked it and was impressed that he was trying to learn Cherokee.

So that kind of opened a door for him to make way into the Cherokee communities. And by the time we left, we could carry on the conversation pretty good, but I'd have to laugh at him sometimes because he was trying to say it was kind of funny. But that's just natural for anyone trying to learn a different language.

JE: Well, I appreciate he forwarded the manuscript, not the final one, to me, so that helped me as I researched for the interview. Let me say at this point, Wilma Mankiller, your wife, gave an interview to our oral history project, August 13th of 2009, and then she died April 6th of 2010.

This became the first interview we ever put on our website, and we felt really honored that she was the one for that, and we launched it on April 10th, 2010. So to bring this all together now, what's interesting, and I read from chapter one, Greg writes, in the months following Wilma's death, I

received from Charlie two fax copies of Chief Mankiller's typewritten drafts of the chapter that follows.

In 2021, I found another copy of her draft manuscript in a barn on Wilma's property at Mankiller Flats. With the help of others, I've carefully and sparingly edited her work and presented it here at the opening chapter. Chief Mankiller retelling of Charlie's early life and the Cherokee tribe's early story is for her to tell. I will begin to read, but then I'm going to have you take off. She wrote: "A few days after the vernal equinox, when the day and night are of equal length and the sun crosses the celestial equator signaling the beginning of spring, Florence Soap experienced the familiar pains of childbirth.

Speaking softly in Cherokee, she told her husband, Watt, that it was time for him to get his mother, Charlie Soap. So you tell me now, Florence is your mother, Watt is your father. Tell me who's about to be born.

CS: Yes, Florence Four-killer, maiden name is Soap – my mother, and Watt. Real name is Walter, but they call him Watt, my dad, and then Molly, (unintelligible), was my grandma, Molly Soap, after marrying my dad's brother. She delivered, I think, five of us at home. She was a small lady, kind of kept to herself a lot, not very conversational with the young kids at the time we were around her.

When older people would come, she would open up and start talking in Cherokee, but her way of talking was more like teaching the people that were around her. In a way, that was educational to them about our people. One that was very interesting about her was she was a healer. She knew a lot about medicine. A lot of people would come to our house to be treated, to be doctored by her. She was someone that had much respect in our communities, but it was interesting that even to this day, I think about why would my grandma pick me to go with her to go look for medicine.

We would go look for medicine. I felt uncomfortable being around her because I was just a young boy. Being around adults was something that we weren't used to. And so going with her, following her through the woods, through the fields and things, getting medicine, she knew which plants to do, for which treatments, for different types of illness. I would

have to do most of the digging when we had to dig for the roots.

Sometimes we took an axe with us and I would have to get the barks off the trees that were medicine trees. I think the hardest part was when we'd be out in the woods and had to go under brush piles to get certain medicine. I would have to crawl under the brush pile to go get it.

Sometimes it'd be in a rough terrain and maybe down a steep slope I would be digging for roots out of a hill. At the time, I didn't realize the importance of it. I didn't know how to do it. I haven't learned to do all that, but then she would start telling me about these different plants. This is for this. (Cherokee) This medicine is for someone that has a fever. Someone got cut or is bleeding a lot. This is the medicine for that. And then she would say, (Cherokee). She said, I will teach you how to fix these medicines when we get home.

I would think, "I just want to go play. I don't really want to be taught." And then she would get me in the kitchen and she would teach me. But she did it in a real commanding, like it's almost like scolding way. "You better listen to me because this is going to be important." And so I learned to pay attention to her. And if I didn't pay attention to her, she'd go tell my dad and my mom, "He's not listening." And they would have to intervene. They would have to come in and kind of put me back on track.

JE: You think you were about 10 years old or so about that time?

CS: Yes, I was about that age at the time.

JE: Yeah. Let me establish the date you were born. What was your birth date?

CS: March 25th, 1945.

JE: 1945. And so how old are you today?

CS: Today I am 77.

Chapter 03 – 11:11
Mother and Father

John Erling (JE): I was reading here that it was clear that Molly was born in the Cherokee Nation well before Oklahoma became a state in 1945. And that she heard first-hand stories about the Trail of Tears in the late 1830s. Did she talk about what she heard about the Trail of Tears and tell you that?

Charlie Soap (CS): They talked about that. I think one of the things that needs to be understood was a lot of times when the adults were in a group talking and the kids came around, they would say, "Go away. You had to move." They didn't really listen. But from, what I've heard some of the stories that they were talking about was that Molly remembered, and my mom and dad, they talked about the Trail of Tears.

It's like the Gagonic East and that's what they would say. And they talked about that. But my granny would talk about, her dad said that he had a long rifle when he would come to visit. She said that he would go back away. He would go away again and not come back for a long time. I imagine he was, I don't know which side, but he would come back to the army he was in in the north or the south back then. You know, that's how she described it. They talked about the Trail of Tears, but it was at the time not very interesting to us. But now I wish I had listened more.

JE: I gotta ask, the name Soap? How did that originally become a name for something?

CS: Well, actually, back in the early days when the army would come in and round up the Cherokees and they would register their names, they said that they would just write their names down how the white man heard her name. I was told by an elder that Soap is not the real name that you all have. But that's what it sounded like to him. But there is a Soap in our tribe back in the early days.

He said they were long-distance runners. They were messengers. And that's where that Soap comes in. He said there was a medicine plant that they had that they would take before they left. Before they ran. And that's

what that was. And so they had that kind of a mix-up. And there is a Soap Elementary in Georgia and then Soap Creek and a beautiful creek down through there. But then it's not the S-O-A-P. It's supposed to be spelled different. It's said a different way. But that's how the white man wrote her name. But we were messengers back in the early days.

JE: The plants that Molly showed you, did that ever mean anything to you as you grew older? At 10, it probably didn't.

CS: Absolutely. Yes, absolutely. I was able to go get some of those plants on my own when Mom or Dad would need it or Granny needed some plants. And as I got older, I would go out into the woods. And I think most of my family, the brothers and sister, would know what the plants are because even the parents knew what the plants were. You know, we used medicine for dogwood, for cherry and hickory and different things. Different kinds of trees, barks, and then the plants. You know, we used different plants. They still use them nowadays.

JE: Those of us who are not part of the community, probably somebody's questioning these medicinal plants. Did they actually heal? Did they help?

CS: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JE: They did?

CS: Yeah.

JE: They would heal wounds or what would they do?

CS: Yeah.

JE: You ever tell a story about her? You can tell about Christina who's here with us. A story?

CS: She was down the river one day and I was at church. It had rained and she was trying to move a log and the log got too heavy for her and it shifted on her and it threw her down on the ground. And she had a big cut right through there when I came in from church. I saw one of my friends in the

kitchen cooking and I thought that was strange. I go in the bedroom and she's laying down.

I thought, "What are you doing laying down when your friend is cooking? You should be cooking for her." And she moved her hand and I could see the blood was kind of spurting out of her forehead. I said, "What happened?" She said, "I fell." Actually, our belief is that you can't just volunteer to say I can help you do this or heal you or help you with this. You have to ask. The person has to ask you to help. So I said, "I can help you with that." And she said, "I wish you would help me." She said, "Will you help me?" And I said, "Sure."

So I went outside. Got the hickory bark and you had to chew it. Actually, it sounds kind of gross when I say this, but that's not the real term we use in Cherokee. She said, it's kind of like blowing like a mist, like when you, like aerosol spray it. So I said, "I'm going to spit on you." And she looked at me. I said, but "That's the way it comes out." So I did that. And then I think about 10 minutes later, it quit bleeding.

JE: Wow.

CS: Yeah. So we use that for bleeding and it works.

JE: Molly, your grandmother, kept a very small book with the Cherokee medicinal secrets written in it. Is that book around? Do you have it?

CS: My daughter-in-law has that book. It's a lot of the medicine is written in Cherokee.

JE: Okay.

CS: I can't read Cherokee.

JE: You can't read it?

CS: I cannot read it. I can speak it, but I cannot read it.

JE: Now your mother, Florence, let's talk about her a little bit. She was a devout Christian.

CS: She was a traditional, spiritual, very spiritual person and probably the nicest lady you would want to meet. Very friendly, very caring about people. When someone was sick, she would be at the hospital or at their homes and things because our lives are so different nowadays. back in those days, when people were sick, we would go sit with them and take care of them. It was not like it is nowadays.

You know, nowadays, they don't want nobody around or whatever. But back then, people came together and helped the families. However they could. But my mother was a very hardworking lady and could keep up with the men and work. We lived on a farm and we did a lot of farm work. She could drive a team of horses and split wood, use crosscut saw and help dad cut the railroad ties and she'd put those things on her shoulder.

Her and my dad, dad carried those railroad ties to the wagon, load them up, take them down and sell them. That's how they made her money. I always tell this story, but I always had a picture of my mom and with a team of horses. When they would cut some of those big logs down, sometimes those logs would go down the hollow.

And mom's job was to carefully lead those horses down the hollow and hook up those chains to the logs. And then she'd drive that team of horses up that hollow. And I could just see her running alongside those horses, whipping those horses, "Get out," you know. She'd go up the hill and bring the logs down and they'd make those, you know, railroad ties. When dad used to plow with a regular turn plow with a team of horses, cut a big old tree down and we'd tie chains to that log and we'd bust those clods up that way and she'd stand on that log with a team of horses. I always had a picture of her doing that, but I have a picture in my mind.

JE: Yeah.

CS: Then we'd come along behind her with those hoes and bust up the clods even smaller pieces so we could plant crops.

JE: She was a gospel singer?

CS: She had a beautiful voice. She was a gospel singer.

JE: She sang in church?

CS: Yes, yes. She was, yeah. All her sisters and my uncles were gospel singers.

JE: Did you get any of that singing talent?

CS: No, I couldn't sing.

JE: Christina's shaking her head yes.

CS: I did. I started to sing one day and I had dogs laying on the porch and dogs jumped off the porch and ran away when I started singing. So, I think they sent me a message.

JE: It's interesting that some Cherokee Baptist preachers warned the Cherokee people against using traditional Cherokee medicine or participating in stomp dances. So, you had that tension in the church.

CS: I think, I wouldn't call it a tension, but I think most of the time the preachers teach from the Bible. But we had to remember way back in the early days, we had to have some kind of spirituality so a lot of them believed that the stomp dance is more spiritual and things like that where people get together and pray and medicine and all that. And nowadays, it's so different. Our generations have changed.

But I think they still respect. I think what I hear most people say is there's so many religions out there. How do we know which one's the right one? So, we have respect for all religions. We have to honor those and be respectful to all people.

JE: Your mother, Florence, how many children did she have?

CS: Eleven.

JE: Eleven children?

CS: Well, I say nine brothers and one sister, but when the baby died when she was born.

JE: Where did you come in the birth order?

CS: I was in the middle.

JE: In the middle. Eleven children. And then, it had to be a huge house that you lived in.

CS: Our house was not very big. Early days, these houses weren't big. This was on that government land we lived in. It had two bedrooms, the living room and a kitchen and a porch. So, my brothers would sleep on the floor. Some of them had beds and my mom and dad had their own room. And then, we had that living room. And some of us would sleep in the living room.

Later on, there was an old shed out there in the back. That's where I slept. I built my own bed, put a mattress on it, and that's where I slept. But, I was always kind of like a daring person, you know, and always doing something different.

JE: Then, let's zero in on your father. Talk to him about his personality and what kind of a person was he.

CS: My dad was really a hardworking man. My dad was real strict. My dad was quiet. My dad was very, I would say, knowledgeable about a lot of things. But, we were not really close to him because, I think, later on in life, I became close to him after I got out of the military. But, he was very disciplinarian and if you messed up, you're going to pay the price, you know.

We used to get whippings and stuff. I always said that if the laws were back then the way they are now, he'd probably be in prison for child abuse because, you know, they took a strap to us. But, we learned. We learned to be disciplined. He made us mine, but he made us work. There was no such thing as enjoying the day as far as just reading a book or playing. We had

time to play once in a while, but most of the time we were working.

Mom cooked with the wood stove and we'd be out in the woods cutting wood, you know, around the garden planting crops and things like that. But, we were always working. So, that's something that I think he instilled in us. I think that's something that's very valuable to our family. I see my brothers or other people talking about my family. They say, they're always working. They don't know how to relax. Well, that's the way we grew up.

Chapter 04 – 8:20

Basketball

John Erling (JE): Cherokee was spoken in the home. Was English spoken in the home at all?

Charlie Soap (CS): No. Because my mom and dad couldn't really speak English and so we all spoke Cherokee.

JE: So then, when you went to school...

CS: Oh, gosh. When I went to school, I was in a different world. I didn't want to go to school. Because I couldn't understand the teachers and I'd sit there all day and then, of course, we had recess periods. That was the time we'd go out and play and then we'd come back in and it was very difficult. Very difficult time for us.

I probably didn't really have the courage to say English words 'til probably in the fifth grade or somewhere along that way because I never was very confident in myself in English. And a lot of the kids that went to school with us, they were Cherokees and we all spoke Cherokee, you know.

JE: Well, it was in the fifth grade you began to feel conversational English was working for you?

CS: I would say so, yeah, but my mom and dad couldn't really speak very good English. They were very broken. They would say to us, (in Cherokee) "You have to learn how to speak English. You're going to have to use it as you get older". We started picking up on it but the other younger ones, they just got used to us speaking English and now they can't speak Cherokee.

JE: Right.

CS: So they just kind of lost it and that's sad. I wish we had all learned the Cherokee now. Now we're trying to preserve the language.

JE: Right. And I was just noticing here in the Tulsa world, Cherokee Nation opens \$20 million Language Center. I think that's awesome. I think that's long overdue. We should have been teaching the language way back but you try to teach these younger kids. They have different interests. You know, they've all got these little phones and now they text back and forth and they can't just communicate like we used to. That's just the changes in the world that are taking place, you know.

JE: Right. Didn't your father work for the railroad?

CS: Yes, he worked for the Kansas Southern Railroad along with a lot of the other full-blown Cherokees and they worked hard. Very, very hard work. That's where he got hurt. The thing about it, they've been on that land – government land. The government said we had to work it. We had to make improvements in order for us to live there.

We had 100 acres of land, dad, and we farmed it and when he got hurt we had to move because dad couldn't work it, we couldn't work and so we had to move into town. That was a cultural shock to us.

JE: On this land which your mother had acquired several acres of land on the original Fourkiller family allotment.

CS: Yeah, it's an East Piedmont community. My grandpa had some land there, his family members and they gave it to my mom but it was all wooded area, rugged terrain. Only thing suitable there was just to build a house

and that's where we built one of those Jim Walters home. They built a shell and we had to finish it up.

JE: Let's move you ahead to high school. Where did you go to high school?

CS: Stilwell High School.

JE: You were an athlete.

CS: Yes.

JE: And a very good one I might add. Basketball was your sport.

CS: Yes.

JE: And you enjoyed that. In fact, Larry Adair, the former Oklahoma Speaker of the House who was a couple of years behind you said it was a joy to watch Charlie play basketball. He could jump very gracefully like a deer and he was an aggressive and focused player.

CS: I enjoyed playing basketball very much. I thank all my brothers and all of my family. My sister was very good. My sister was someone that could play like a boy. We said she had a jump shot, could dribble. She was a great athlete. Unfortunately, she got hurt. She had a very bad injury to her knee. We'd play around the yard playing basketball and things like that.

JE: You played in high school. It was probably all Native American players in high school or not? Was it a mix?

CS: It was a mix. Most of it was Native Americans. Most of the Cherokees. Back then, we traveled by cars instead of by bus. So Coach Burrington had a '57 Chevy and he'd say, oh, you're Cherokees. Get in here. We'd ride with them. He'd ask us how to say words and stuff.

Sometimes we'd use Cherokee words to make a play. He'd call it out in Cherokee words and that's why we'd go into the formation.

JE: And nobody else understood, right?

CS: Nobody knew what we were saying.

JE: But then you were recruited into college in Baycone College.

CS: I went to Baycone College under a basketball scholarship. Ken Hayes recruited me. But going back to education, I never knew what a grade point was about. But my grade point was pretty low. So actually, when I was in high school, I was flunking English and the teacher told me I couldn't play Friday night because I was flunking. I went in and told my coach. I said, "My teacher says I can't play Friday night. I'm flunking English." He said, "You're what?" I said, "I'm flunking English."

So he left the gymnasium and I could hear the superintendent, Mr. Hall and Principal Argan. And then when he came back in, he said, "You will play Friday night." He said, "But you better get your grades up." I said, "Yes, sir." When I went to Baycone, I made the team, but then the coach came back and said, "You need to go to study hall because your grade point's low." he said, "But you play intramural independent basketball as you can because I want you back next year."

And so I did. Of course, in college, you think now I'm free, I'm on my own, you know, this and that. But next year I came back and then I still didn't make it. I didn't really care for it back then because then I had friends in college and, you know, we could go. I mean, we didn't do anything bad. We just didn't have any money to do anything anyway, so we just roamed around however we could.

JE: After you completed your first year of college, Leroy Hummingbird, an acquaintance of yours, asked you if you wanted to go to California for the summer. Tell us about that.

CS: Yeah. Well, you know, I didn't like calling, hey, picking strawberries, picking beans and all this and pulling weeds out of the strawberry patch. So the opportunity came and I'd heard people say when you go to California you always get rich, you know, and I'd say, I guess I wanted to get rich, whatever that meant back in the days and so I told them I would go to California to go to work.

I didn't know what kind of work they were talking about. All I knew was California sounded like an exciting thing to do and so we went. We wound up in Mandeville Island, Stockton, California. We worked in the fields cutting asparagus and the boss liked me. He asked me if I would transfer over to this other part of the camp and I said, and I would work irrigating grapes so we started irrigating grapes.

This was just during the summer. I wound up driving trucks for hauling potatoes and onions and out in the fields. So I had a pretty good job, really. His name was Fernando Marino. I'll never forget his name. He asked me to stay and I told him I was going back to Oklahoma. He said, "I want you to stay. I want you to work for me". I said, "I'm going back to college." So I came back.

JE: Did you come back to Baycone?

CS: Baycone, yeah. I think I had \$77 when I got home. I didn't get rich.

JE: In Wilma's final words here of this first chapter that she'd written about you, Wilma obviously lived in California. In fact, the family was relocated to California as she told me in our oral history that she did. She writes here, in hindsight, "Charlie and I were both in California in the 1960s. Charlie also made a brief jaunt to San Francisco with a few buddies before returning to Oklahoma." Then she writes, "Is it possible we stood near one another on a street corner or in an onion field?"

CS: Probably. Back then, the farm workers were protesting about the wages and all. They had recruited us, the Cherokees, to go to work for them to replace them, not knowing that. And years later, we were talking to Delores. And the more I listened, the more I thought, that's the time we were in California. And so I started talking to her. I was talking about my time there, and she said, well, you were a scab.

JE: And you had no idea.

CS: I didn't know that.

Chapter 05 – 7:35
The Navy

John Erling (JE): Along about 1965, the Vietnam War was ramping up. And there was recruitment. Navy needed people. So did you volunteer at that time?

Charlie Soap (CS): In the Navy?

JE: Yeah.

CS: Yes, I did. Not intentionally. I don't think I did. I just kind of made a real quick decision. My cousin, Larry Crinton, asked me to take him to town to join the Navy. And he said, "Go with me. I said, I don't want to join the Navy. I said, I'm going to college." He said, "Well, take me to town."

So I borrowed my mother's car. We went to town and went to the post office to the recruiter that was there. And he asked me if I wanted to join, too. And I told him, no. I said, I'm going to college. He said, I don't really want to talk to you then. I was always interested in being a heavy equipment operator. Listening to the recruiter, he's telling "Larry, we'll send you to school, whatever you want to do." That caught my attention. I said, "Well, boy, that might be a good opportunity for me to go and learn some trades there."

And I got closer to them talking. And by the end of the conversation, he said, "Do you want to join? I said, I'd like to go to CB, Construction Battalion School." He said, "We'll send you to Construction Battalion School." All they wanted me to do was join, I guess. And so I joined. And I asked about the school when I got into the Navy and aboard the ship.

He said, we're not sending you to no school for Construction Battalion. I said, "Oh, well, somebody told me differently." He said, well, "That doesn't matter." He said, "You're here now." He said.

JE: Wow. So how long were you in?

CS: I was in the Navy for four years.

JE: Okay. You played basketball, though, too.

CS: Basketball for the ship's team. I used to see these people going off the ship carrying tennis shoes. And I was wondering, where'd they go? Because I was afraid to get off the ship. I was just a country boy. I'd never been around big cities or anything. I'd seen all these ships and submarines and all that. I said, "Wow, this is kind of scary." When they would get off the ship, and one day, if I got the nerve to follow them, and I followed them to the gymnasium, I said, how do you get to play ball in there?

He said, you got a quarter, get your shoes, socks, jockstrap, shorts, t-shirt. I said, I got a quarter. So I slapped that quarter down and got my stuff and started shooting around. A couple weeks later, I noticed that some of those other guys on the big court were playing. So I got the nerve to go inside and sit way up on the bleacher.

The lieutenant looked up and saw me and said, "Don't you off the ship?" I said, "Yeah, sir." He said, "Come on down and play with this tryout." So I did. He was a big guy. Of course, him being an officer and being an enlisted man, he was just kind of shoving me around and really roughing me up. I said, that's not fair because he's an officer. He's just a toy. So he said, "Come on, do something." So anyway, I started pushing him back and everything. He went up for a shot and I crammed him and stuffed him that way.

He looked at me and said, "Do that again." So he took the ball and then did it again. So I did it again. He said, let's go down here and sit. So we sat down and we talked and I tried out for the team. About three weeks later, I was captain of the basketball team. That was the U.S. Navy team.

Later on, he told me after playing several games, that was the second year, I think he said, "The U.S. Atlantic Fleet team is going to be scouting you tonight." He said, "You better put on a good show." So I did. And then Atlantic Fleet asked me to come and try out with them. So I did and I made the traveling team. There's some big boys on that team. There's some big guys.

JE: How tall are you?

CS: 6'2". There was one guy that was on there, a seven-footer.

JE: Wow.

CS: Yeah, he's a big guy.

JE: Do you watch basketball now? Are you interested in it today?

CS: No, I don't. Not really. It's hard for me to sit around and watch TV. I'm always doing something. I like to watch all you play.

JE: Yeah. By the way, in addition to basketball, you also played baseball, didn't you?

CS: Yeah.

JE: What did you play?

CS: I played softball, really, instead of baseball. I was a fast pitcher. I was a fast pitcher in softball. But I play anywhere. I could play anywhere for a second or anywhere like that. But mainly, I was a pitcher. I tried out for the catcher. I didn't like it back there. So I played everywhere.

JE: Yeah. I'm thinking the great athlete Jim Thorpe. What an example he led. I interviewed his son for VoicesofOklahoma.com.

CS: I'd heard of him. As a matter of fact, the eighth grade teacher used to talk about Jim Thorpe. Back then, I didn't know who Jim Thorpe was. And he'd say, I used to coach Jim Thorpe. Later on, I thought, "I wish I'd known about him." I always thought really like to, his name was Coach Emmett McLemore. He's gone now, but he coached him. But as far as my being in athletics, I just played.

JE: Yeah.

CS: I loved to hit the ball. I was a pitcher. And also, I'll come up to bat, I was a cleanup batter.

JE: Oh, wow.

CS: I was a batter. And they'd look at me and say, you're a pitcher. You're a cleanup batter. I'd say, oh you just watch.

JE: We should bring back, you mentioned Ken Hayes. He recruited you at Baycone College. And we're all familiar with that name because then he was at Northeastern. He was at Oral Roberts University. So the town got to know Ken Hayes and we really liked him. I just wanted to bring his name out again that he actually recruited you in Bacon College. You got a degree in education, bachelor's degree, didn't you, when you came back home? And where was that school?

CS: I started the military. I came back with the GI Bill. Back then, we got \$149 a month and I went to school at Northeastern State University and I got a degree there.

JE: You were hired by Southwestern State University in Weatherford to work for the Upward Bound Program.

CS: Yes.

JE: Was that right out of college?

CS: Yes. I was employed with the college and then recruited the native students in the western part of Oklahoma. That was something I enjoyed doing very much. But I didn't like living out there. It's very different. I wanted to come back home to this area. We had bought a horse trailer to take a horse back to Weatherford one time.

My ex-wife's uncle loaned us a trailer. We brought it back and I stopped by the housing authority and said hi to one of my friends and the director walks by. He looked at me and said, "What's your name?" I said, "Charlie Soap." He said, "Are you working?" I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "Weatherford." He said, "What are you doing out there?" I said, "I'm working."

He said, "You need to be working for us." He said, "You go back there and put in your two weeks notice telling him you're going to go back home. I work for the housing authority." He said, "I want to hire you." Just like that. So I did.

I went back and put my resignation in. It was funny because when the president of the college heard I was leaving, he called me into his office. Back then, I started out with salaries \$10,000 when I first went to work there. And then when he heard I was leaving, he called me into his office and he slid a piece of paper across the desk. He said, "Would you stay for this? \$12,500."

I said, no. I said, "I'm going home." He said, "Would you take more?" I said, no. I said, "I'm going home." I came back to the housing authority and cut it up for \$7,000. Instead of going up, I would drop.

JE: But then that was your first entry into working in community relations and working with people, wasn't it? And must have discovered that you had a gift for that because that's what you ended up doing the rest of your life.

CS: Right. Yeah. To me, I didn't recognize that gift. I just worked. But I imagine other people did.

JE: Well, not everybody could do that. You know, we don't all have that personality to be able to mix with everybody.

Chapter 06 – 4:45

Six Pack

John Erling (JE): But you had an interesting experience. You were driving down the road and you stopped at this roadside gas station. Something happened to you there. You'd been in a grocery store and you bought a tall boy and a six pack of beer.

Charlie Soap (CS): Oh, yeah. Because the young guy and just being out of the middle of town, I guess you could say I had a drinking problem. But to me, I was just enjoying drinking and going out and doing things like with the other guys and stuff. I was going home and I knew I was really kind of going overboard with my drinking. And I didn't like it. But I'd see some guy I respect and I said, I'd like to be like him.

Very well respected, doesn't drink, you know, nice guy. And I said, I'd like to be like that man. So that day I came to the grocery store and brought a six pack and a tall boy. By then, I think the spirit was dealing with me. So I was on the way home and I opened up the six pack and he said, throw that away.

And I said, who ever heard of throwing a beer away? It's my six pack. He said, throw it away.

JE: Who's saying, the spirit?

CS: The spirit. Yep. The third time he said, "If you don't throw that beer away, he said, you're going to be an alcoholic for the rest of your life." Boy, and that put the fear in me. I said, I don't want to be an alcoholic. So I threw that beer out, six pack. I saw that rear mirror, looked in there, the beer cans are toppling down the road.

But I felt good. I felt good. So I said, my last beer, I popped that tall boy open. He said, "Throw that one away too." I said, "This is my last beer. I'm going to quit." "Throw it away."

Third time again, he said, "Third time, I'm going to tell you again." He said, "If you don't throw it out, you're going to be an alcoholic."

So out the window it went. And I felt so good. I felt like a whole lot of stuff was lifted off my shoulders. Got home that night. It was dark that night. I sat there and I thought, what happened back there? I was sitting in the recliner. TV was off and everybody was going to bed. I was just sitting there thinking, what was that?

I remember I closed my eyes. I was going to pray. When people say they've seen the light, I've seen the light. I experienced it. People may think I'm crazy, but that's fine. But that light was so bright. I thought, wow, what was that? What happened?

Then I thought, if it's real, I said, I want to see if it is. I go down the hallway and go into the bathroom, close the door. Total darkness. I said, Lord, if it's real, I said, make it happen again. I was standing on my knees and it happened again. I thought, my God, is this real? It's a real deal. But the feeling that came over me then was so overwhelming, such a good feeling. It changed my life.

JE: You have tears telling that story. How old were you about when that happened?

CS: In the 20s.

JE: Yeah, and all these years later it brings that emotion out. The light, you just saw like a big spotlight of some sort? What was it like?

CS: Just a bright light. You know how you turn on the light at night and it just comes down, but it's ten times brighter. It just came from above. But there was something on my shoulder saying, that's not real. You didn't see that. You just imagined it. But I knew what it was. It changed my whole life.

JE: And that was the last time you drank too.

CS: I drank off and on, you know, but that was really awakening for me where I really knew I had. And so I didn't keep it up as much as I could have probably later.

JE: When you say the Spirit, is that God talking? Who's the Spirit when you say that?

CS: I think it's the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit. I know it's the Holy Spirit, yeah. Even now, I feel it. I feel the Holy Spirit. I think you have to be really focused deeply spiritually to feel it, but I do. I have faith and I believe in God. And prayers do work.

JE: Yeah.

CS: I've witnessed, I've seen prayers. Work with the prayer warriors and the prayer request that comes in. It's amazing what it does.

JE: And you've seen prayer heal.

CS: Prayer heals, absolutely. God heals, prayers heal. But you can't just say words, you've got to really be deeply rooted. You can't be a water skipper.

JE: I understand what you mean.

Chapter 07 – 19:26

Bell Water Project

John Erling (JE): Then you confided in an elder and you told that person that you needed a job that would allow you to help people. That then led you to the work of continuing to help people. Let's talk about you and Wilma. Where you met, fell in love?

Charlie Soap (CS): Well, I first met Wilma when I was coming in from the field one day and I got a call, I got a message saying that Wilma Mankiller wants to talk to you, wants to meet with you. Back then, Wilma was a big name, the person, the name, the tribe. I thought, what does she want to see me for?

They said, she'll meet you at the Cherokee Nation office in Stilwell. So I drove by. I went to the door and to the Cherokee Nation office and I told somebody, I'm here to meet with Wilma Mankiller. I said, you're here to meet Wilma? I said, yes. She said, hang on. First time I ever saw her, she came to the door and met me. She said, the first thing she ever said to me in person was, so you're the infamous Charlie Soap?

JE: The infamous.

CS: I said, I don't know who I am in that term, but I said, I'm Charlie Soap. She said, I got one question to ask you. She said, "I need a house built. Can you help me?" I said, "I have one question to ask you." She said, "What's that?" I said, "Is your request to build a house on restricted land?"

She said, yes. I said, "Wilma, it'll take a long time because you've got to go through a lot of bureaucrats to get the restrictions on the land removed. It has to have a clear title." She said, that's all they didn't know.

She turned around and walked off. Wind up, she built her own house, didn't have to go through the tribe. She built her own house.

JE: She built her own house. And you said no to her at first.

CS: I didn't say no, I just quoted the policy. But I would have helped her build a house. And then later on we met somewhere else at the stomp dance, I think we were at the stomp dance. But just before that, Bell Water Project was being talked about. I didn't know exactly what all that was, and I'd heard people talk about it off and on. And then one day I was told they wanted to see me in the director's office, so I go back there. And when I walked in, there's the director, all the heads of the department, Ross Swimmer and the attorneys sitting there.

When I walked through the door, Ross Swimmer said "If any man can do it, that man right there can." I said, "Doing what?" And I looked over there and I saw Wilma Mankiller sitting around. She said, "How are you doing, Mr. Soap?" I said, "I'm doing fine, Miss Mankiller." And she sat down beside her. And I was intimidated by her, because I was hearing about her the world over.

She was just a big shot, you know, and here was an old country boy, you know. And I listened to them, and I thought, man, they're talking about Bell. That's a rugged community. They don't know what they're getting into. So anyway, I walked out. But I had some relatives back in the community also. My brother lived there, and I thought, well, they might be able to do something with their help.

I remember I walked into the conference room, I was looking out the

window, and I thought, that's going to be hard today, because those people, they don't trust the tribe, they don't trust the housing, they don't trust anybody. And then someone spoke behind me, and she said, "What do you think, Mr. Soap?"

I turned around, Wilma was standing there, and I said, "You think we can do it? I said, "It's going to be hard." She said, "You better change your way of thinking, because we're going to do it." I said, okay.

And then one day, after working together, she wanted me to come by the house, and I went by the house, and she was having trouble with one of her daughters, and I wanted to talk to her about it. And she said, "You talk about spirituality and all this, so I just need to talk to you about some things about that." I just told her, "You know, we pray and ask God to help us with our issues, with our problems and things."

She said, "Tell me more about this dude you call Jesus." I said, "Well, he's not a dude." I said, "It's Jesus," because she wasn't a believer at the time. She started going to church, and then later on came by the house again after some time, maybe a month or two or something like that. I could tell there was something. I really had a lot of respect for her, because she really was someone that I'd never experienced, had seen before, where she really liked people, was pure at heart, having love and caring about the people.

I said, well, she's different from everybody. So I was attracted to her and things like that. I guess we both attracted, and that's when we embraced and we kissed, and that was it.

JE: So then on the Bell Water Project, which became famous, actually, Chief Ross Swimmer put, I guess, his principles on the line, and he bested his chances for re-election on that 17-mile-long water line for Bell, Oklahoma, because the Cherokee community had no running water at all.

CS: Yeah, that was a community that couldn't get funding for housing because their houses, plumbing was so, those houses were dilapidated, really poor homes, and what good would it do if we put water in there because you have plumbing problems and all that. We couldn't get funding for it because of housing, and then we couldn't get housing

because there was no water.

So that's when they came up with this self-help water line. It was phenomenal. So many things happened, positive things happened to that community, to the people. They had great leadership, they had great people there. Once we started getting into it, working with them, those people were tenacious, they wouldn't give up or anything. They worked during the hot summer months, during the cold winter months, they would let water in. But we had to reach them first because they didn't trust us.

JE: So then you actually went out to call on a few people around Bell, and you knocked on doors, small community gatherings. You had to sell this, the idea, but then you needed volunteers as well. You needed everybody.

CS: It was difficult because like I said, they didn't trust the tribe, the housing authority, the government or anything like that. And then when I started talking about it, and telling them to get water, they said, "Oh, we've been promised water before, we're not going to get it." And I think one of the most disturbing comments that I heard towards me was something like, "Oh, you're just another Indian coming in here, you're going to do this, do that." He said, "You're not going to do anything." I thought, where do I go from here?

And I said, "Well, I mean it, I really mean it, we're going to do something." He said, "You're just another Indian making promises." I don't want to talk about it. It was difficult, hard.

JE: How long did that go on for before the first dig actually began to work?

CS: Uh, we called for meetings probably two or three months before anybody really came. We go out there, they didn't believe us. They thought we were just saying stuff like other people have. It was very difficult, but we started doing little projects like helping somebody replace a screen door or replace windows. The little stuff that was important to them or help somebody mend a fence or Wilma would buy materials like fencing materials or boards for repairing some small items and things.

That's how we started getting attention. "Hey, those guys really mean it. They'll do something.

They'll help. They're really helping." It was something that the leaders, my brother Johnson, was involved in church, so we started going to churches and asking the people there to help us. The preacher was an important part of the decision that we needed that they should help us.

Then there were the healers, the medicine men, the community listened to. We went to them. That finally got, inside their arena where they were blocking us out.

JE: This water line, how deep down would you have to dig?

CS: At least two foot.

JE: And so that was rocky?

CS: Oh, yeah.

JE: And did you, and you did it both by hand? You had equipment to help?

CS: I think from the onset, I never thought anything like this had been politics. It was political from the very beginning. After later on, as things started happening, they gave us shoddy equipment. The back hole was worn out. Jackhammers were worn out. But it's amazing how people came on board like this guy named Curly. Poor man. Nobody really thought much about him.

He came to work. In a month's time, he was the most important man they had on there. They had so much respect for him because that guy could repair dozers, he could repair jackhammers, anything mechanical wrong, he could fix it. And that won him over to the people. He started that project from the beginning to the end, and everybody liked him. That was a big plus for us when we had those shoddy equipment.

JE: Were two mile segments assigned to certain neighbors? Did you take it in pieces?

CS: Yeah, we had almost 18 miles. We thought the number of families we divided would we'll do two miles. And so that kind of equaled out to how it would be even to divide how many people are going to work. And they said "Once you finish two miles, that's it. You don't have to work no more."

Another group would take over. It started out, it was pretty good. And then it got to be where people were saying, boy, we dug this far today, and one day we dug so far. And you could tell there was some body language from the people for the other groups that smile or that kind of look at each other not knowing what's going in their mind was "We can do that faster." It got to be competitive. One group was all women.

JE: And they were digging.

CS: They were good. They were digging. I'll tell you, I could tell you some stories about those women that was in the water line project. Not only there, but other projects we worked on. I mean, they could work. But women worked there and the people worked together. And it got to be competitive. Who's going to dig the fastest two miles ? And that's really helped us.

JE: All these people got together and probably didn't mean they loved each other, but they had little issues amongst each other?

CS: When we were working in the community, people would say, "Whatever you do, don't put them together because there'll be a fight."

JE: A fight would break out.

CS: Yeah. And so Wilma came up with the idea, we've got to get these people together somehow. Everybody's got to work together. She said, "We're going to put these people together and let them work together." I said, "Oh my God."

But we put them together. But it worked. Once they got in and working together, they'd start talking to each other and next day they're laughing and working. It really solved a lot of problems.

JE: Beyond the waterline, they ended up probably liking each other.

CS: They got along pretty good. As a matter of fact, some of them got to be pretty good fishing buddies and stuff like that.

JE: That's something. Wow. You know, I talked to Wilma and her oral history about the Bell Project and I thought you'd like to hear what she said. I'm going to read to you what she said and then we'll respond.

She said, "It didn't mean that they loved each other, but they would help each other. We tapped into that. The day that we started the Bell Project after organizing people very tightly for a long period of time to work on the waterline and build the waterline themselves, we assigned certain families to a two mile section.

That would be done. Then, another family would take over the second two miles. When we drove down to Bell that day, I remember we had CBS Sunday Morning News there and Ross Swimmer was there. Coming around that bend up to where the project was starting, I had a moment where I hoped, I just thought, what if they don't show up after this? What I believed all my life was people would do this. So when we turned around the corner and there were cars there and people there."

And you know, we had our old dilapidated backhoe ready to go. It was just an incredible sight. That was a very inspiring project. Very inspiring project. For you to hear her talk about that moment has to be special for you, right, Charlie?

CS: That's the night that people came together at that meeting. We were driving down the road hoping that people would be there. And we went around this sharp curve and you could see the Bell School. And I mean, there were cars parked all over the place. Side of the road, down the ditches, across the ditch. "Oh, my God," I said, look at that. "Look at that crowd." She said, "This is unbelievable." And I said, yeah. She said, "Charlie, you're going to have to get up and speak. I said, there's too many people. I can't speak like that." She said, "Charlie, you got to."

We walked in the cafeteria. It was jam-packed. It was awesome.

CS: Yeah, and all three of us,

JE: Christina, you, and me, we all have tears in our eyes right now as you're telling that story. And you laid all that groundwork and brought them together to begin that project.

CS: Yeah, it was amazing. And everybody was happy. They knew that this was going to be real. Yeah.

JE: Then it was in 1983, the crew could see a little red flag off in the distance. Tell us about that.

CS: Well, we were getting to the end of the project, to the end, to the line. And Curly was a backhoe operator. He could use dynamite, he could do anything you wanted done. So we got there, they were working, and he was sitting up on the backhoe. And I walked up there and I said, "Curly, I guess you're going to be happy this is over because, man, you've been with this all the way through."

He got real teary eyed. He said, "I hate to see this come to a close." He said, "I've met so many nice people here." He said, "There's all good people, Charlie." He said, "I'm going to miss this." He said, "I don't know what I'm going to do." "Curly," I said, "we've been talking to Burnt Cabin. Burnt Cabin is going to need water too."

We used that word "Gadugi," where everybody working together was and he looked at me and says, "Gadugi." I said, "Yeah, Gadugi." And of all people who shows up at Burnt Cabin, one of the first people that showed up was Curly. He'd come driving up and he'd say, yeah, he worked with this there for a while.

JE: The whole thing gives me chills as you're talking about it. Whatever happened to Curly, did you say that?

CS: He's gone now, but this is what I hear, this is what I hear, and I'll probably get emotional here. But the story is, this guy, Bill and his dad was walking down this dirt road close to their house and they saw this smoke coming

out up the bridge. And they said, we'll see us down there.

They went down there and said, "Dad, there's some man down here under that bridge. Looks like he's cooking." So they went on, they got to their house and they told Cindy that there was a man there. She said, "Well, why didn't you bring him? Tell him to come and eat with us." He said, "I don't know who he is." She said, "That don't matter, go get him."

So now in that family, you have to know that the lady, Cindy, powerful leader, she doesn't give up if she wants something. She always helped people. Very strong lady. So they went back and talked him into coming. They don't know how long he'd been there, but he said he needed a bath and all that. So they fed him and cooked for him. And then they asked him if he needed a bath.

He said, "I could use one." But he said, "Well, go in the bathroom and take a bath." He said, "I couldn't do that. I won't do that." So they said, "What if we closed the kitchen and we got a tub and heated water for you and then you can clean up there." He said, "I'll do that." So that's what they did. They gave him a tub. He cleaned up and the story is that when he got through, they said his hair was real curly.

So Cindy asked him, "Do you mind if I call you curly?" He said, "No, that's fine." They said, "You want me to cut some of your hair off and trim it out?" He said, "Oh, I would love that." So time goes on. They asked him if he would stay with them and they took him in. He stayed with them and they noticed later on that there would be several cars parked in their yard and they would say, "Well, who's here? Who's here?"

Nobody would be there, but Curly would be out there working on those cars. Somehow the people in the community found out that he was a mechanic, so they started bringing our cars there. And then one day he was gone. He was gone. He was gone to town. They didn't hear from him again. And what happened was he had found a woman. They had got acquainted with the woman and he took up with her.

That woman was blind and he was taking care of her and living with her. They come to find out her last name was Soap.

JE: A relative?

CS: I don't know what relationship she was, but the people talked about that. But anyway, they wound up building a new home for him. But that's the kind of stuff that happened.

JE: That story you just told about Curly, that was before the Bell Project.

CS: Yeah.

JE: That's how he came to the attention of everybody.

CS: The Bell Project. But somewhere down the road, some people came and visited with Bill and them. Because they're gone. Those people are gone. They were asking about that guy, Curly. And they said, "You know what?" He said, "There's a big garage in Kansas City, and he used to work there. And one day he just left. He's the best mechanic they ever had. He's gone." And that's where he left and wound up in our part of the country.

JE: Did he just disappear and all of you never knew where he ever went?

CS: From Kansas? They didn't know where he went. Yeah. He came here.

JE: But then... but then he left your community and you didn't know where he went. Is that true?

CS: No.

JE: So you don't know where and when he died?

CS: No, I didn't. Because back then we were so busy. Yeah. That self-help movement took off so fast. Sometimes we had eight, nine projects going at one time in these different communities. Water lines, people wanted water. So I'd go in and organize those groups and say, "This is how you need to do it." Or I'd bring some of the people in and Bell and say, "How did you do this?"

They'd ask all these questions. And that's what they wanted to do. They had a bunch of lines going sometimes.

JE: So then to complete the Bell story, Jim Kaufman, a volunteer, took a wrench to a valve.

CS: That's when they opened that water.

JE: Water gushed from the water faucet in the Fourkiller family home.

CS: Yeah.

JE: That changed the whole community, didn't it? When that water came through into those homes.

CS: It changed a lot of things. Not only Bell, but other communities. Still yet, there's still a need in some of these rural communities. They don't have water.

Chapter 08 – 6:40

Wilma Became Chief

John Erling (JE): Then one day in the summer of '85, you got a call from Wilma to come to her office. This was rare, and you went there. She closed the door, and that's when she told you that Chief Swimmer was under consideration for an appointment in Washington.

Charlie Soap (CS): Right. She was very emotional. I don't know if she was touched, moved, or frustration or fear because she was really having a hard time talking. And she said, "Charlie, Ross is going to leave, and I'm going to be the chief. I'm going to have to move up." She said, "I didn't expect that. Ross talked to me about that." She said, "He called me. Said, 'well, you can do it.'" I said, "You've been doing a lot of things in the communities before." She said, "But not of this magnitude." I said, "You'll have some good help." I said, "People like you."

She said, "Will you help me?" I said, "That's what I'm doing."

JE: So that's when she became the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation.

CS: Yes.

JE: Then in that time, newspapers were beginning to cover the beginnings of Indian gaming, and the question of casinos was coming up in the Tahlequah area.

CS: I never was into gaming, and again, I was always on the communities. That was my passion. That was just captured me and caught on me. I loved it. I enjoyed doing that work. Then gaming came up. She came home one night, and she walked to the door, and I could tell she was upset. I looked at her. She walked in the kitchen and sat down. I said, "What's wrong, Wilma?" She said, "Counsel, Pastor Resluse, and we have to do gaming."

She said, "That's one thing I told the church leaders that I would not do." She said, "Now I have no choice." I said, "Well, you could call them and tell them. They'll understand." She said, "Do you think they will?" I said, "Wilma, I think you have such a respect out there." I said, "I think it's not you. It's just something that the tribe has decided."

She called the preachers. They're very understanding. Yeah.

JE: She certainly had her health problems, many of them, and one of the major ones was a kidney transplant.

CS: Yeah. She had a lot of health problems, but boy, that didn't stop her from doing the work. She went to work and kidney functions. I think I first noticed that when we were working on the Bell Project with the myasthenia gravis, the disease that she had. She'd have a hold of something and she'd drop it.

There was times she got down in the ditches with the people and you could tell she was struggling, but she tried not to let it show. And I asked her one time, I said, which was a mistake I think. I said, "Do you have health

problems?" And boy, she looked at me. I mean, boy, her eye just pierced right through me. She said, "It's none of your business." I said, "Well, I was just asking." I didn't know what else to say. She never didn't answer me. And then later on, she said, "I do have some problems."

And I said, "Well, all the stuff that you do, I said, you should talk about that. I think you would inspire people if you did that. There's people who think they can't do anything. They're probably sitting around the house. But if they know what you're doing, I think it'd be good." And then later on, I'd say about a month later, she walked in and said, "Charlie, I did what you asked me to do. She said, I did tell about my health problems."

She said, Leanne Taylor, someone interviewed her on Channel 6 or something, and she started getting calls. She inspired people. It was awesome. So she was more comfortable with her problems with the kidney and myasthenia. I mean, it's really hard for her to keep up that momentum, to keep up the fight in her. She was sick a lot.

Back then, I did a lot of volunteer work in the communities because I couldn't really hold a job because I didn't know when she would be sick. So quite often, I'd have to take time off. I don't think any employer would want me to be that way. There were times she would be so sick that she couldn't get up. she'd try.

I didn't know what to do, and I just finally called the ambulance. I told her, I said, "Wilma, you better get ready because the ambulance is coming to pick you up." I can't say what she said to me, but she can make her tongue lash. She said, "Why would you do that?"

Next day in the hospital, she was feeling better, and she would say, "I'm glad you called the ambulance." She said, "I was really sick." That's not the only time that happened, but there were times when she was really sick. Even at the office, she would have to get up and go to the bathroom and get sick because of kidney failure.

JE: She also was involved in an automobile accident, and she also had cancer. Wasn't it cancer?

CS: Yeah.

JE: Isn't that what took her in the end?

CS: That pancreatic cancer took her in the end. She came home, I think she'd been from Chicago or Wisconsin somewhere. She said, "I can't do this anymore, Charlie. I can't do this." I thought she was just talking and I thought she'd be okay in a week or two weeks. I said, "Oh, you'll bounce back, you'll be okay. You always do."

And she said, "Not this time, I can't do this." I think she knew she had a major problem. And I think she called Christina and told Christina, she said, "I can't do this." They got together and they talked and that's when they found out she had pancreatic cancer. Very much along the line, she was gone.

JE: Where did she die?

CS: She died at home in Rocky Mountain. When she got diagnosed, she wanted to be home. And the doctor said, "I think we could start treatments for you and think we might be able to—" Wilma said, "Not this time." She said, "you're just prolonging my suffering." She said, "I don't want any treatments."

So we went home. People from all over came. It was just incredible the number of people that showed up. Different leaders, tribal leaders, dignitaries, people from all over. Must be about 20, 30 people there wanting to help. It was yeah, quite a legacy.

Chapter 09 – 5:56

Willma's Coin

John Erling (JE): So then when I take this coin and show it to you, and the likeness of Wilma is on that quarter, as you look at that coin, how does that make you feel? What words come to your mind?

Charlie Soap (CS): You know, John, I guess I'm very proud of her accomplishments. And one of the things that she did ask before she left was, "Charlie, would you keep my legacy going?" I didn't know how to respond to it. But that coin came and was a surprise to me. And I remember when they said that they wanted to put her on a quarter.

Actually, I told them I didn't want her on a quarter. I would not give approval. I would want her on a \$1,000 bill. And they got real quiet. I said, I don't think they're joking kind. I said, "Oh, that would be such an honor." So I said, you know, that would be good. I told Christina, she was there, and, Christina, you work with the men. I'm not good at stuff like that. But the design is a lot of her work, working with the men. She's the one that took the lead role. Yeah.

JE: You worked with the men to come up with this.

CS: Yeah.

JE: I'm sitting here looking at it right now. It's just hard to believe that it's still hard for you to believe that it's there.

CS: Yeah. I don't want to spend my quarters.

JE: I hear you.

CS: And everywhere we go, when we did the movie Cherokee Word for Water, there's a lot of people saying, "If it hadn't been for Wilma. I couldn't be who I am." I mean, you're talking to doctors, to lawyers, or CEOs and things like that, some young person coming up the ladder. She had such an impact, such an inspiration in her life.

I can see why she wanted to keep her legacy going. As a matter of fact, I always say, you know what? I didn't have to keep her legacy going. She did it. It was obvious that everybody had so much love and respect for her.

JE: I asked her in the oral history interview what she was most proud of. This is what she said:

“I think probably being able to facilitate a group of health professionals. First of all, I never did anything by myself. Anything that I've ever done in my life has been with a team. I think the fact that we were able to set out a plan over a decade, say we're going to build freestanding health clinics, develop a prevention program, and then actually stay focused on that and get it done. That sounds not that exciting, but at that time we had no gaming money, so we just had to figure out how to work with the Indian Health Service and the Congress to get things built.

I told the people in Stilwell that I would build them a clinic when I was first elected and I was going to get it done one way or another.”

CS: Yes, that sounds like her. It's yeah, she had a way, I guess she probably had a vision how she could do it. She was brilliant. I know when she was running for office she said, “Charlie, Ross asked me to run. What do you think?” I said, “I don't know anything about politics. I said, if that's what you want to do, fine.”

She said, “I don't think people would want me to be in the office if they found out my background.” I said, “What do you mean they found out your background?” I thought she must have robbed a bank or something in California. “I've done this kind of work.” She said, “before in California,” she said, “I used to work with the Black Panthers.” I said, “you did?” She said, yes.

“And I know all those guys, the leaders. I worked with them. And then also was with AIM.” I said, “You mean American Indian Movement?” She said, “yes.” I said, “if they found out I had this in my background, I don't think they would elect me.” I said, “Wilma, they're looking for people that will fight for people.” I said, “I think that would be no problem, because you're fighting for the people, fighting for the lives, fighting for the freedoms and all these things, fighting for women's rights and all.” I said, “I think you'd make a good candidate.”

She said, “would you campaign for me?” I said, “I don't know how. I wouldn't know what to do.” She said, “just speak for me. Just talk about me.” I said, “I can do that.”

People, it didn't faze them at all. They didn't know who they were dealing with when she told me she had been working with the Black Panthers in the AIM movement.

JE: And then when she announced her candidacy for a second term, she won that election with 82% of the vote.

CS: Absolutely. I love her philosophy about politics. I wish all politicians could see the way she looked at politics. After she got in the office, walking down the hall sometimes I'd see somebody that was very not in favor of her running for office. They were hateful. They were mean. I mean, we ran into a lot of stuff, you know, threats and all that. And then to see somebody that had been so mean, hostile to her and everything like that, I said, "do you mean you hired those people after what they did to you?"

She said, "Charlie, that's just politics. Said, doesn't matter. I think everybody should be involved in politics." She said, "They don't have to love me or hate me." She said, "the important thing is, as long as they do the work for the people, and they work for the people, for the betterment, for the good of them."

She said, "Yes, I will hire them." She said, "They don't have to like me, as long as they work for the people." And I think that's missing big time in politics.

JE: Yes, it is today, for sure. Oh, yeah, what an example.

CS: Yeah.

Chapter 10 – 8:30

Gangs

John Erling (JE): But then you continued to work with Cherokee Communities, your Oklahoma director of an international nonprofit. And so you worked with people who had hard times in life in the early 90s, CCF. What was that, CCF?

Charlie Soap (CS): CCF was a Christian Children's Fund early on, and they did Bouncers for Clothing. I tell you what, that was a program where I didn't even know where that came from. I just got a call one day, and a director named Tom Rodenbaugh, he was over the U.S. programs. He said, "I'd like to come and interview you for this job." I said, "what job are you talking about?" He said, "well, I got your resume.

Wilma had submitted it to me," and I said, "oh, okay." So I got home, and I said, "Wilma, did you send an application information to Christian Children's?" She said, "oh, yeah. I said, I know you do good work on those kinds of things." She said, "I think you should qualify for that." I said, "Well, there's a guy named Tom Rodenbaugh that's going to come in and interview me." She said, "Oh good."

So we did a lot of community work. Instead of just clothing vouchers we turned his program into community development work.

JE: Then you heard that drugs and gangs had become a problem in Cherry Tree. So you've got these rival gangs to work together to become teammates?

CS: Yeah. I was approached by that community to see if I could come to work with the kids. And I told them, "I'm not doing youth work right now. I'm doing waterline projects and community buildings." And they said, "we really need your help." So finally I told Wilma I'm going to go there and meet with them. When we met, there was a lot of need.

That's a whole different story itself. It was a very, very moving story. They came together in parent committees where it allows us what to do. There was a lot of drugs, gang activities going on. So I got the group together. I'm leaving a lot of stuff out here. I wish I could tell a whole story because it's a very, very wonderful story, inspiring story about those kids. We had a bunch of kids together and tried to get them together, work together, play together. The kids were very active.

One of the things they wanted to do was see a major league ballgame. It

just so happened that Christina and Wilma, they had that program going. I told them about it. Christina said, "I think I can help you with that or they can go to the baseball games."

Christina talked to the manager of the Oakland A's, Jose Canseco was a big name back then. Everybody wanted to see them. And Christina did the manager, and the manager told Christina, "Why don't Charlie meet us in Dallas because we have a game with the Texas Rangers so they don't have to race them and travel all the way over here." I wanted to prove to those kids you can do anything you want to do. You set your mind to it. There's no such things that can't be done. The manager said, have Wilma write a letter to George Bush Jr., who owns the Texas Rangers, and ask if he can help.

So Wilma shoots a letter off to them, and then they came back and said, "we'll give you 58 tickets to the game. You can bring those kids there." And that's what happened. But the gangs were still very challenging, and they heard about the fact that they may get to go to the Major League ballgame. That's what drew them in.

They said, "hey, I want to go to the ballgame.

I want to see a Major League." They said, "you're going to have to join our group, Cherry Tree Youth Group. So we can't take you if you're not." So they joined. And they said, "but you've got to work. You're going to work for it. You're going to help the elders. You're going to clean up the highways. You're going to clean up this. And you're going to help build ball fields and that." And they said, "yeah, we'll do that."

So they came in, and we took a bunch of kids to Dallas. They got to see a Major League ballgame.

JE: That makes me want to clap. That's wonderful.

CS: And you know what? From that project, it evolved into the Boys and Girls Club Town Hall. That's where actually the Boys and Girls Club started was in Cherry Tree. Yeah. And the marshals said the most complaints they got was to Cherry Tree because of the Cherry Tree project. The marshals came

in and played basketball, did things, and became friends with those kids. It's just wonderful.

JE: One day, you were standing on a street corner at the Stilwell Strawberry Festival.

CS: Yeah.

JE: Very, very crowded. Tell me what happened.

CS: Oh, there was a strawberry festival. It's the biggest thing that happens in Stilwell. I was standing in the street corner. We'd moved our office to Tahlequah a couple years later, and I'm standing on the street corner, and somebody taps me on the back. I think it's somebody going to hit me upside the head or what's going on or whatever. And so they tapped me again, and I stepped off.

I walked this curve, kind of distanced myself, and I look up, and there's this guy standing there with the badge. The marshals, one of those gang leaders, one of those gang boys from Cherry Tree. He looked at me, and he stuck that chest out like that and showed me his badge. I said, for all people, I said, you?

And he said, thank you, "Mr. Soap." Oh, my. And I said, oh, man. We talked, and he walked off. It's interesting when he walked off because all these young kids are coming around and trying to get his attention and all. He just walked off. The crowd, it's quite a scene.

Christina Kale(CK): Will you tell the story of the basketball game?

CS: Oh, yeah. I think that was on a Saturday day we had a basketball game going. You know, just different kids get together and play. And I noticed one of the gangs that came through. I thought, there's going to be a problem here. And so I walked up to the guy, the leader, and I said, you guys going to play?

He said, no. He said, "we're coming after someone." And so, and they'd come after one of those kids. I said, "we don't want any trouble." I said,

“that's out of the question.” And they didn't pay attention. They just went off, separated. They were after that one. But I had to leave. I had to go to another project. But I told this guy, I said, “I'll be back in about an hour.”

I said, “you need to watch those guys.” When I came back, they had this basketball game going. It was a rough game. No referees, no host party or anything. They was elbowing, shoving each other. It was, you know, a really rough game. I told Ronnie, I said, “that's not good. Somebody's going to get hurt.” He said, “let him go. They're the ones that decided what they want to do.”

The youth group challenged the gang. He said, “if we beat you in this game, you leave that boy alone. And if you beat us, he said, you can have him.” So they had a game going. And the youth group beat the gang. And they kept their word. Let him go. They left. Kind of like back in the history days when the Cherokees used a stickball game to settle their differences.

Instead of going to war, killing each other, they had a stickball game. Whoever the winner was, that's how it was.

JE: Isn't that Stilwell scene when he tapped you on the shoulder one of your great rewards because you've done so much in the community. You can't know all the influence you had. But when those moments arise, you must carry that with you in your heart.

CS: I don't think anything about it. I don't think about that, really. But I just know that working with so many young people, even my own kids that's been in trouble, I know how important it is. All they need is that little support. They need support. They need that pat on the back. Say, “I'm proud of you. I love you.” That goes so far for anybody. And I say, even adults, we adults need that.

We need that pat on the back. Yeah, absolutely. When somebody tells us we love them. Somebody loves us.

JE: Yeah.

CS: And so does young people need it. You know. Yeah.

JE: We need to spot their gifts. And then if we spot them, encourage them.

CS: Absolutely. They need that. Yeah. Some of them don't have parents. Some of them, parents are gone. And they're out there by themselves. It's hard for them, you know. Instead of stomping them in the ground, you need to extend a helping hand. Say, "let me help you."

Chapter 11 – 6:05

Most Proud Of

John Erling (JE): I asked Wilma what she's most proud of. Can I ask you that question, too, as you look back? What are you most proud of?

Charlie Soap (CS): I think the most proud of is the people. You give them a chance that they can do what they want to do. You have to trust them, give them the opportunity. And the things that they can accomplish. What people give me credit for in the community, I have to say, I didn't do this by myself. The people, the volunteers. The people, the volunteers in the communities help me. You know, so I always give credit to my staff or to the volunteers in the communities when I'm giving credit. I think that's where it all belongs. We all do it. We do it together.

JE: Again, how old are you?

CS: Seventy-seven.

JE: Seventy-seven. And you're not one to sit around. So what are you doing these days?

CS: Trying to play some golf. Learn how to play. I was asked recently to help with the Cherokee language group. So that's where I'm going.

JE: You were asked to participate...

CS: Yes.

JE: ...in that language center.

CS: Yes.

JE: What will you be doing in that language center?

CS: I think they have some plans how they want to do this. I think they want to see what input I may have. I think they mainly would want to see maybe organizing. How would you organize this? I think. I'm not sure. I can't speak for them, but that's just what I was telling Christina. I think that's what they want me to do. But I'm a fluent speaker.

JE: The children now, Cherokee, are they learning the Cherokee language? This is what this is about. Because of this, the Cherokee language will never fade away.

CS: Right.

JE: I think some tribes are nervous about that, that it's fading.

CS: Some of it's gone.

JE: Even gone. So this, and Chief Hoskins is certainly involved in that.

CS: I think that's long overdue. Finally, the tribe's getting to a point where the Cherokee speakers are now going to be pretty much in charge of just how they want to teach it. I don't know. I don't know how that's been taught in the past. I think they have been successful in some ways. But I think there's a lot more to the language rather than just learning how to say something in one way, one word. And then there's all different ways.

It needs to be said. It needs to be taught. If we'll ever reach that point in our time, in my, I think this is the last generation that really are the fluent speakers. I hope we have enough time to teach those young people. But the young. The young people has to be drawn in. The young people have to want it. You've got to make it appealing for them. You've got to draw

them in.

I always say you've got to make them feel good. You've got to make them want it, you know.

My thing is, you'd be surprised what pizza – the hell one knows. That's how I get my young people to come in and help me when I have a project. I buy you all a pizza.

JE: Oh, yes.

CS: There they come. And you get their attention and this and that. But I think there's different ways we need to draw those young people. And really, really, really bear down and make it interesting for them to learn how they can keep the language going. Because we are losing it.

JE: Right. And the culture.

CS: We need to keep that culture going as well. Also, that's all going to be in the culture, the medicine, the food and all that. It's going to be included. There's some people on that already.

JE: What's your favorite Cherokee food?

CS: Beans and fried bread.

JE: Yeah. You gave me a book here when I came in. Mankiller Poems: The Lost Poetry of Wilma Mankiller. With a foreword by Joy Harjo, who I've also interviewed for VoicesOfOklahoma.com. You discovered some of these poems, I think.

CS: Yes. Unfortunately, I'm kind of embarrassed to say, I never was someone that liked poetry. Probably I didn't understand poetry. And after Wilma was gone, I looked at the poetry. I thought, oh, my God. I wish I'd listened to that. I wish I'd have been more part of her writing with poetry. So I found some of the poems in the folder that she was writing about my book. And then Greg and him found some more in the barn. She had a folder of them. And also, she did some prison work early on. So there were some

poems from the San Quentin prison.

Greg did some research. He said, "I think they're all gone. They couldn't find anybody." So the poems were included in that.

JE: Well, there are many poems. I've opened up the last one. The last page and the last poem. Why don't you read this as we begin to conclude that poem that Wilma wrote.

CS: I kiss the rare fruits of joy and feel the heat of being alive, embracing closely the lights of fading dreams as they circle the edge of something called freedom.

JE: Yeah. So how would you like to be remembered, Charlie?

CS: Well. I don't know. I guess I'd like to be remembered as a good person.

JE: Well, there's no question about that. But you also have a humble nature. You could go beyond that, your community involvement and all that kind of thing. But maybe you want to leave it at that. I'm not going to force you to say anything more. But you wanted to be remembered as a good person.

CS: Good person that helped people.

JE: So, Charlie, I want to thank you for this time. It was such a pleasure to meet you, Christina, to be in this wonderful setting along the Illinois River in a log cabin. It's the best setting I've been in to interview people. So thank you, Charlie. I appreciate it.

CS: Well, feel free to come back anytime. We'll sit around and talk and just tell stories.

JE: Yes.

CS: That's great. I love it. And I love what you're doing. You're preserving history and doing a lot of good for our society. Thank you for what you're doing.

JE: Thank you. Should we say a big amen to this whole session? Amen?

CS: Amen.

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